

Reflecting the Missio- Logoi of the First Overseas American Missionary:

**Making a Christian Mission Language
for Burmese-speaking People**

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ABSTRACT

The first overseas missionary from the American Continent reached Burma/Myanmar, Southeast Asia, in early nineteenth century. Adoniram Judson made his missionary translation into the Burmese vernacular at the time. Today after the bicentenary commemoration of the first overseas American missionary's arrival to Myanmar, by sacredly using the Judson version of the Holy Bible in the Burmese language, Christian Burmese has almost disappeared. This paper determines that Judson made his missionary language in the Buddhist Burmese context instead of the animistic traditional Burmese context. Why did Judson employ Buddhist Pali-Burmese in making his mission language? Why did he choose a Buddhist approach in his missionary translation? All the other ethnic groups in Myanmar such as Chin, Kachin, Karen, Lisu, etc., have their rapid and dynamic conversions from their primal religions to the Christian faith through 'translating the message' of the Christian gospel into their animistic traditional context.

This paper argues that translating the message should be made in the traditional context, i.e., spiritism in the religious systems of the primal religions. This paper probes the mission languages employed by the first overseas American missionary in the early nineteenth century in Burma among the dominant Burman tribe. Thereby, it contributes a strategic proposal for the use of the language of Christian mission in contemporary Burmese vernacular in the traditional context.

Key Words: missionary translation, conversion, primal religion, mission language, traditional context

INTRODUCTION

When the first overseas missionary from America made his *missio-logoi* into the indigenous language, he made his entire missionary translation totally in the context of Buddhism. Adoniram Judson made his missional approach in the Buddhist context instead of the indigenous traditional context i.e. primal religious beliefs and systems.

Why did Judson use a Buddhist approach rather than animist approach in his missionary translation? He was well known as a genius and devout missionary translator. He not only translated the whole Bible from the original languages into the Burmese vernacular at the time, but also made several classic dictionaries such as Pali-English, English-Pali, English-Burmese, Burmese-English and grammar books such as Pali Grammar, Burmese Grammar, etc. His classic usages of *missio logoi* have been problematic throughout the ages in counterpart with Theravada Buddhism in the Burmese vernacular. This paper claims that an appropriate *missio logoi* in today's Burmese vernacular is urgently needed for 'missionary translation' among the Burmese-speaking-peoples.

I. AN IMPACT OF THE MISSION LANGUAGE OF THE FIRST AMERICAN MISSIONARY UPON THE BURMESE VERNACULAR

Adoniram Judson pioneered missionary translation among the Buddhist Burmans in early nineteenth century. [Judson arrived in Yangon (Rangoon) on July 13, 1813.] Judson directly employed *Paya / Paya-Th'kbin*, the title of the Buddha to identify with his Christian God. Why did Judson employ the atheistic term of Burmese Buddhism to designate the theistic Christian God?¹ We shall reflect in more detail on the missionary translation

1 The present study claims the Buddha as an atheist. Buddha, from the perspective of Theravada Buddhists, is an atheist. He was/is regarded as a great teacher, a guide, a model of moral practice, etc. in Theravada Buddhism.

of Judson in his Burmese vernacular mission language later. Judson would simply attempt to introduce a new religion to the Buddhist Burmans by identifying the Christian God with the Buddha employing the atheistic term *Paya* / *Paya-Th'khin*. In fact, it seems that he intended to designate the Christian God or YHWH with *Paya* the title of Buddha as the Most High of the native Burmans—Burmese-speaking people. Technically speaking, it has been a problematic naming of the Christian God among the Buddhist Burmans. The mission languages of Judson in the Burmese vernacular have been confusing receivers confused in terms of converting process from an existing cognitive structure of traditional religion to a new religious cognition through his missionary translation.

For example, a Burman convert has to be baptized in the strange and confused names of *Paya* the Father [Khamitaw *Paya*], *Paya* the Son [Thataw *Paya*] and *Paya* the Holy Spirit [Thanshinhaw Winyintaw *Paya*] into a new religion. Then what does it mean by *Paya* or *Paya-Th'khin*? From where did the Buddhist Burmans adopt this term for the title of the Buddha? We shall have to trace here the origin of the term *Paya*. As a matter of fact, no one seems to know from where the term *Paya* originated.

In Burmanized Buddhism, there are three precious gems, namely the Tri-ratna: they are 1) *Paya* [*Bubra*]; 2) *Taya* [*Tara*]; 3) *Sangha* [*Thanga*]. *Paya* means the Buddha himself, *Taya* means the teaching of the Buddha—dhamma [Sanskrit dharma], and *Sangha* means the monk—bhikkhu. The *Paya*, *Taya*, *Thanga* in the Tri-ratna is arranged in consequently hierarchical order. Therefore, *Paya* the Buddha is obviously the atheistic Most High in Burmanized Buddhism. From where did the Burmanized Buddhist terms originate, then? Enriquez argues, “The Burmese words *Phaya/Paya* (Buddha), *Sangha* (Assembly); *Neikban* (Nirvana); *Pu-t'o* (Pagoda); *Kyaung* (Monastery); *Shan* or *Shin* (A Novice); *Hlu* (to give Charity); and *Shiko* (to worship) are not Pali or even Sanskrit, but are derived respectively from the Chinese words *Fu-ya*; *Sengchia*; *Niek-p'an*; *Fu-t'o*; *Kung*; *Shang-jen*; *lu*; and *shih-k;ao*.”²

2 C. M. Enriquez, *Pagan: Being the first connected account in English of the 11th Century Capital of Burma, with the History of a few of its most important Pagodas*, (Rangoon: Hanthawaddy Press, 1914), 35-36.

When the first American overseas missionary made his missionary translation in the nineteenth century, he employed *Paya-Th'khin* using the Burmese vernacular name of the Buddha as the Christian God. This has been problematic in proclaiming the Christian gospel to the Burmese-speaking people and also in having inter-faith dialogue between Buddhist intellectuals and Christian preachers due to the employment of the same name for different deities. We shall see a reflection on the nineteenth century Protestant missionary translation later. We argue herewith that in Buddhized Myanmar, even though the people therein technically and/or officially venerate the Buddha in the Theravada tradition, they still practically embrace their primal religious rituals of supernatural beliefs today. We have seen an argument above that the Burmese term *Paya* [Buhra] is derived from *Fu-ya* the Chinese term. If so, does *Fu-ya* imply the Buddha?

Some traditions say that *Paya* is the corrupted word of *Purusha* the Sanskrit term for 'Cosmic Being'— *i.e.* Purusha - pursha - pura - Puhra - Buhra —whereas some would say it is a corrupted word of Buddha— *i.e.* Buddha - Budha - Buhra -Puhra - Buhra [then Buhra is pronounced as *Paya*]. At whatever rate the origins of the word may be, the indigenous understanding of *Paya* has so far been the title of the Buddha in Myanmar. In fact, *Paya* has been regarded as the traditional title for the Buddha in the semantic Burman language spelling such as [Phura], [Bhura]. They call the Buddha as Buddha *Paya*.³

Now, we shall have a glimpse of an inscription written in the early time of the Bagan period in order to trace the genesis of *Paya* [Phura], [Bhura] or *Paya-Th'khin*. It was Rajakumar, the son of King Kyansittha, who wrote the inscription. The famous Rajakumar inscription, rather well known as the Myazedi inscription, was written in 1113 C.E.⁴ What is interesting in the inscription is the description of the name or title of the Buddha. In the very beginning, it describes Buddha as *Pusha Th'khin* and in the end, it

3 For the term *Paya*, the present study investigates its origin and the derivation via interviews and conversations with Buddhist scholars who are presently pursuing higher degrees in Buddhist Studies in Sri Lanka and India. Shan and Siamese term for *Paya* is pronounced as *Phra* [P'ra].

4 Some versions would date it 1112.

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describes the future yet coming Buddha as *Ari-madeya Paya-Th'khin* in the vernacular Burmese term.⁵ The inscription was written in four languages: Pyu, Mon, Burmese, and Pali on each face.

It is interesting that consequently the king is called *Bayin* [Bhurin], and his queen, *Mi-Paya* [Mi-Phura]. But the queen ruler [ruling queen] is called *Bayin-Ma* [Bhurin-Ma]. Now, in regards of the word [Bhura] *Paya*, we shall have a glimpse at the contribution of a famous Burman historian, namely, Dr. Than Tun, former professor of History Department in Mandalay University. Than Tun thinks first of all that the Burmese word “*purhā*” *i.e.* [Buhra] *Paya* “meaning the exalted one is probably derived from *vara*.”⁶ “Generally,” he explains, “it denotes Buddha himself as a pagoda where the bodily relics of Buddha are enshrined.”⁷ He further writes:

But a king is also addressed as *purhā* [*Paya*] and his queen called by that name with a *mi* [or *ami*] prefix denoting female as *mipurhā* or *amipurhā*. To show the difference between the spiritual and temporal lords, some scribes of old Burma took special care to say *mlat cwa so purhā* —the most exalted *purhā*, when they wanted to signify Buddha and *purhā rhan*—the *purhā* who is living, to denote the then reigning king. The king is also mentioned *purhā lon*—the Boddhisattva [Pali Boddhisatta].⁸

The Burman, at any rate, calls or knows Buddha as *Paya* — Bhura and king as *Bayin* — Bhuryin today in their semantic language traditionally. In fact, the origin of the term *Paya* is obscure like *Pathian*. No doubt, *Paya* has been obviously used in the vernacular Burmese language as the title of the Buddha since the early Bagan period in the eleventh century. Whenever the term *Paya* is employed it implies the Buddha himself first, and the kings, and the monks also. The Buddha images and pagodas also are called simply

5 Pe Maung Tin, “Myazedi Inscription” an article in *Nararat Ko-thwe* (Yangon: Sabei Oo Sarpay, 2nd Edition, 1974), 18-27.

6 Than Tun, “Religion in Burma, AD 1000 - 1300 *Journal of Burma Research Society* Vol. 42, part 2. December 1959), 50.

7 *Ibid.* 50-51.

8 *Ibid.*

Paya, for example, *Shwedagon Paya*, *Sule Paya*, *Mahamuni Paya*, etc., in the Burmese vernacular. The king is entitled as *Bayin* — Bhuryin similar to Bhura as most high in the hierarchical positions. Thus, the Buddha in Myanmar has been called as *Myatswa Paya*, meaning Glorious *Paya* the Buddha, and the king or the monarch, as Bayin Min Myat meaning Glorious King *Bayin* — Bhuryin.

Then why did Judson employ *Paya* to identify with the Christian God in his vernacular operation? Was it due to being the Most High of the Buddhist Burmans? Alternatively, did Judson invent a combined term *Paya-Th'khin* regarding this as the theistic Cosmic Lord? In fact, strictly speaking *Paya* has no similar characteristics with the Christian God both in “nature” and in “person”. *Paya* is not a name of any theistic deities in the semantic Burmese vernacular language. It simply implies the Buddha and his images. Therefore, the present study would argue that the employment of *Paya*, the title of Buddha to identify with the Christian God in the early-nineteenth-century-Myanmar is inappropriate. In addition, the invented name *Paya-Th'khin* meaning *Paya* the Lord for Christian God does neither imply to be a creator nor a god. Rather it has no specific meaning in Burmese vernacular language except its implication of the Buddha as master and lord. Accordingly, one sees that Christian faith has not properly expanded among the Buddhist Burmans in the name of *Paya Th'khin* in Myanmar today. The missionary churches vista established among the Burmans in the colonial time have to survive today with handful of worshippers who have almost disappeared.

II. A REFLECTION ON THE PROTESTANT CHRISTIAN MISSION LANGUAGES EMPLOYED AMONG THE BURMANS

The *missio logoi* of the missionary translation among the Burmans has so far been problematic in the cross-cultural process. Adoniram Judson's employment in the missionary translation of the atheistic divine name *Paya-Th'khin* for the Christian God has been problematic since the very first impression given to the contemporary Burman king at the time in early nineteenth century. When Judson made his first visit to the well-known Ava

palace of the last Burman dynasty, he met King Bagyidaw, who might also perhaps had been called Bagyidaw-Paya, son of Bodaw-Paya, son of Alaung-Paya the founder of Konbaung dynasty.⁹ It was by the end of January 1820, after almost seven years since his arrival to Myanmar, that Judson greeted the Burman monarch the first time at the palace. There the first impression of the Burmese vernacular name for Christian God *Paya-Th'khin* made the emperor furious. Judson, indeed, would attempt to submit the Holy Bible already translated into the Burmese vernacular version and a gospel tract covered with gold leaf as a petition to the emperor. The Burman monarch, while reading the first two sentences of the tract in his own hand, would dash it onto the floor angrily. What was the reason that the king responded emotionally? It was obviously due to two facts: 1) the employment of *Htawara-Paya* meaning Eternal *Paya*, that Judson formulated and employed as Christian God, made the king lose his temper. Note that there has neither been eternity *Htawara-tara* in the Pali-Burmese context nor eternal *Paya* Pali-Burmese *Htawara-paya* [Buhra] in the concept of Buddhism; and 2) it also directly counters the monarchical title *Paya*—*i.e.* the king *Bayin* [Buhryin] was regarded as *Paya* [Buhra].

There has been neither eternity nor any eternal thing that is permanent in the concept of Buddhism. The tract that Judson petitioned the king to read went something like this: “There is one Being [eternal God] who exists eternally; who is exempt from sickness, old age, and death; who is, and was, and will be, without beginning and without end. Besides this, the true God [*Paya-Th'khin*], there is no other God [*Paya*] [...]”¹⁰

9 The founder of the dynasty was well-known as U Aungzeya, a chief of a village, who became the monarch with the title Alaung-Paya, meaning the becoming or future Buddha. The son of Alaung-Paya, a successor of the dynasty, was named with the title Bodaw-Paya wishing to be Buddhahood. Now, King Bagyidaw also might had been undoubtedly wishing the Buddha-hood as a monarch. Thus, *Paya*, Judson's best choice for the name of God for the Burman encounters with the title of the monarch.

10 Courtney Anderson, *To the Golden Shore: The Life of Adoniram Judson* (Toronto: Little, Brown & Company Ltd., 1956), 251. Also see, Maung Shwe Wa, *Burma Baptist Chronicle* (Rangoon: Burma Baptist Convention, Board of Publication, 1963), 26.

Thus, the missionary translation of the name of God in the Burmese vernacular was obviously confronted and rejected at the first impression by the Buddhist Burman monarch. Nevertheless, Judson and the Protestant missionaries stubbornly would employ *Paya-Th'khin*, the Buddhist atheistic term, as the Christian God. We have seen that *Paya* is not a Burmese vernacular term equivalent to the Christian God. It is just the honorary title of the Buddha. Then why did Judson make his choice to employ the atheistic term *Paya-Th'khin* to designate the Christian God? Were not there any options to designate the Christian God among the deities of the indigenous religious system? It seems that Judson had to choose *Paya*, the atheistic masculine term to identify with the name of Christian God, since he found no other name for a native Supreme Being in the semantic Burmese vernacular language and their religious system. In other words, there has been no Supreme Being in Burman Buddhism to be identified with the Christian God. It is therefore obvious that Judson had no other options for the name of the Christian God when he began his missionary translation. It seems that eventually he had to employ the atheistic term *Paya* regarding the Most High of the Buddhists. The problem is that employing *Paya* as the Christian God in missionary translation leads to controversial interfaith dialogue with the Buddhist Burman intellectuals. Judson himself had the first experience in his interfaith dialogue with Buddhist intellectuals. Unlike the hill tribes, every Burman at the time had already socially professed Theravada Buddhism when Judson attempted to make his missionary translation. Obviously, he would surely find that there had been no ideas of the existence of a Supreme Being or a Creator in the religious cognition of the Buddhist Burmans. Eventually, Judson, in order to prove his gospel message, would claim the existence of an Eternal *Paya*. He then thus formulated a new vocabulary in the semantic Burmese spelling *Htaṇwarah-Paya* in which *Htaṇwarah* is an adopted Pali vocabulary for eternal/eternity—which the Buddhist Burman intellectuals would have never accepted in interfaith dialogue, while he would have approached in person-to-person teaching as his usual method.

Note that the Theravadins do not believe the Buddha to be “a person who exists permanently”.¹¹ There is no permanent thing in the Theravada

11 Phra Sriyansophon, Bhikkhu Sugandha, Paul Dennison ed., *Phra Buddha Dhammacakra* (Bangkok: Phra Buddha Dhammacakra Creation Committee, 2001), 29.

concept. Impermanence (anicca) is a critical teaching within Theravada Buddhism.¹²

Until now, we have only reflected on the transliteration of the Christian God for the Burmese-speaking people. There have been many inappropriate terminologies in the missionary translation of Judson in the Buddhist context. This study would argue that the missionary translation in the Buddhist context has been inappropriate in terms of theologizing for the indigenous people. We argue that taking an animistic approach in terms of translating the message of Jesus Christ into the Burman animist context would be appropriate and intelligible.

Christianity has already been contextualized into the early nineteenth century Burmese contemporary vernacular. The present study would argue Christianity is cannot to be contextualized into contemporary Burmese vernacular today, but rather it proposes to theologize the indigenous people through their primal religious cognition. To do so, one needs to comprehend that the Burmese-speaking-peoples are more animistic in their practical life. Now let us take a glimpse of the animistic context among the Burmese-speaking-peoples.

III. FUTURE POSSIBILITY OF CHRISTIAN MISSION IN THE REGION

The American Protestant Christian missionaries had misidentified the divine name of God when they used the atheistic masculine enlightened one as the equivalent to God for the Theravada Buddhists in the early nineteenth century. Thus after almost two centuries of employing the

12 For a more detailed study of Buddhist Burman intellectual response on the Christian mission language, see Cope Suan Pau, *Anthropological Considerations for Mission Education among different Ethnic in Myanmar* in *Transforming Teaching for Mission: Educational Theory and Practice: The 2014 Proceedings of the Association of Professors of Missions*, ed. by Robert A. Danielson and Benjamin L. Hartley (First Fruits Press, *The Academic Open Press of Asbury Theological Seminary*, Wilmore, KY: 2014), 230-245.

atheistic term *Paya* as the divine name of God, Christianity in Myanmar has been declining together with its neighboring Theravada countries such as Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. After some centuries-long Christian mission enterprises,¹³ today the twenty-first century sees modern Suvarnabhumi still having a very low percentage of Christianity in her 'land of gold' with Myanmar at 4% Christians (3% Protestants, 1% Catholics); Thailand even a less than 1% (perhaps 0.7%); Laos 1.3%; and Cambodia 2.0% out of tens of millions. The status quo of the Christian percentage in the region shows obviously the need of a new way of doing Christian mission. At the same time, it also challenges the viability of the old colonial missionary translations of the Protestant missionaries. In Myanmar, for example, the colonial name of God *Paya-Th'kbin* has been employed throughout the postcolonial era in local Christian mission. Today it seems that Godself needs a new vernacular name so that God can be introduced anew in this new millennium in the region. Then God shall find a proper way to be accessed among the Theravadins with a new and proper name. What shall then be a proper name of God for the future Christian mission in Myanmar and neighboring Southeast Asia?

Regarding the future Christian mission and the cross-cultural missionary translation in the region of Southeast Asia, the present study would like to claim that the colonial name of God should be changed. *Paya*, *Phra*, *Phayao*, etc. is, in fact, the vernacular name of the Buddha in the region. Not only the name of God, but also the other names of vernacular terms in the missionary translation ought to be revised in the cross-cultural vernacular operation for the twenty-first century Christian mission in the region. A semantic reconfiguration has been needed for today's vernacular language in terms of missionary translation. For example, in Myanmar, "angels" is translated in its literal meaning as the agents of heaven, namely, *Kaung-gin-t'man* which is unintelligible in the vernacular Burmese. There is no *Kaung-gin-t'man*, meaning the angel of heavens, in the Burmese

13 Myanmar is going to commemorate next year (2013) the bicentennial anniversary of arrival of her first Protestant missionary to her land. Note that Myanmar Protestant Christianity makes up some three percent of that population with the majority being Chin, Kachin, Karen, and other minority hill tribe ethnic groups. The Christian Burman church has to survive with a handful of members who have almost disappeared. There are also other minority citizens' churches such as the Chinese Methodist, the Tamil Baptist, and the Telugu Methodist churches.

vernacular language. Instead, why did Judson not employ *Nat* the vernacular term for angels who are spirits and resides in the heavenly realms, namely Tavatimsa—“(Trayastrimsa in Sanscrit and Tawadentha in Burmese) Heaven of the old Indian and now Burmese Buddhism”¹⁴—in the belief of the indigenous primal religious system? There are generally two categories of *Nats*: good *Nats* and evil *Nats* in the animistic Burman belief.¹⁵ If Judson and the American missionaries made a survey on the animistic belief of the indigenous people, then they would have surely discovered Buddhism in Myanmar was a mixed religion with animism in Hinduized culture.

It is interesting that *Thagya Min*, meaning literally “king of omniscience”—might be understood as an all-knowing and all-hearing spirit, who had been appointed as the chief of the 36 *Nats* by the first monarch Anawrahta in the eleventh century Christian era when Theravada Buddhism was first Burmanized at Bagan city. Together with *Thagya Min*, the modern Burmese societies in Theravada Buddhism, have the 37 lords of *Nats* in their traditional rituals. Then what has been the role of *Thagya Min* in Burmanized Buddhism? Sir Richard Temple would surely no doubt help us understand the role of the King of the *Nats* in Burmanized Buddhism:

The Pali word Tavatimsa means “belonging to the Thirty-Three” and the Thirty-Three compose an Order of supernatural beings with Sakra, *i.e.* Thagya, as their head, just as he is head of the modern Burmese Order of the Thirty-Seven Nats. In another view, which is a confused reference to the old Indian idea of the changing personality from time to time of the chief of a Buddhist heaven, every one of the Thirty-Three is a Thagya, and in this view the head of the Thirty-Seven Nats for the time being is one of the Thagyas.¹⁶

14 Sir Richard C. Temple, *The Thirty-Seven Nats* (London: W. Griggs, 1906), 34.

15 Angels are known as *Nat-tha* or *Nat-thami*, masculine and feminine terms respectively in gender in Burmese vernacular language.

16 Sir Richard C. Temple, *The Thirty-Seven Nats* (London: W. Griggs, 1906), 34.

It is obvious that Judson and the Protestant missionaries totally ignored the traditional beliefs of *Nat* in their colonial era cross-cultural missionary translation process. Furthermore, Judson's Burmese version of the Bible is a Pali-Burmese version translated in the early nineteenth century. Consider that the Myanmar church is still using the Judson version of Burmese Bible. Judson was distinguished as the "Bible missionary" to the Burmans spending his whole life, as Elisha I. Abbott narrates, "He spent almost his life to give the Bible to the heathen in their own tongue."¹⁷

Accordingly, we would like to argue that a new name of God is needed for the twenty-first century cross-cultural missionary translation among the Theravadins, so that the name of God will be appropriate and intelligible. The present study would like to suggest that the name of God should be translated directly in the literal meaning of the creator to the Theravadins, who technically and doctrinally deny the existence of a creator or a Supreme Being. For Myanmar, the name of the Christian God ought to be a kind of *Phan-zin-shin* simply meaning "creator" in semantic the Burmese modern vernacular language. In addition, the Almighty One [Hebrew *El-shaddai*] ought to be translated as *Tago-Shin* meaning the "one who has full power and authority."

It is obvious that approaching the "heathens" through their atheistic Theravada faith was ineffective in missionary translation of the Christian faith. Then in order to designate the Christian theistic God, did Judson attempt to find any theistic name of supernatural beings in the animistic beliefs of the Burmans? We do not know if Judson investigated Burmese supernaturalism. It is therefore rather obvious that Judson absolutely ignored supernatural beliefs and its huge practice in the *Nat*-worship ritual among Buddhists—the indigenous Burmans. What if Judson had made his missionary "vernacular operation" targeted to the belief of the existence of supernatural beings in the *Nat*-worship ritual among the Buddhist Burmans? Could then, for instance, *Thagya Min*, the imported Indra of Hindu [Sakka in Pali], be a candidate for the Christian God for the Burmans? Kachins and Chins, the Tibeto-Burman-speaking cousins of the Burmans, have already

17 Elisha I. Abbott, "Missionary Sense" in Walter N. Wyeth, *A Galaxy in the Burman Sky* (New York: Ward & Drummond, 1892), 188.

converted to Christianity worshipping God in the name of the Supreme Being in their primal religious system. A proper name of a Supreme Being is needed for the Christian God among the Burmans today. Like the Kachin terms *Karai-Kasang*, *Phan Wa Ningsang*, *Chye Wa ningchyang*, *Phan tagya*; and the Chin term *Pathian*, Karen term *Y'wa*, Christian God needs a new name in Burmese. It might be *Phan-zin-shin* directly translated as the “creator.”

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